OLD-FASHIONED BREAD BAKING IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA

Description of Film by Dr. Maurice A. Mook

Description of Region

The film shows Mrs. Amon Yoder (the name is fictitious) making homemade bread in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, May 6, 1965. Mrs. Yoder lives on a farm a few miles west of Belleville, Pennsylvania. Belleville is in the center of the Kishacoquillas Valley, the eastern end of which is but a few miles south of the geographical center of the state. The valley is known popularly throughout central Pennsylvania as "Big Valley," and is practically never referred to by any other name by its own inhabitants. It is one of the richest agricultural areas in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Mrs. Yoder and her husband have lived in Big Valley all their lives. The valley, consisting of a limestone plain bounded by ridges of the Allegheny Mountains, runs southwest by northeast across the northern reach of Mifflin County. Kishacoquillas Creek, from which the valley received its official name, breaks through the southeastern mountain range at Reedsville, to join the Juniata River at Lewistown. This town was a center of road and river transportation in frontier days, and has been a station on the Pennsylvania Railroad since 1849. Now a city of approximately 15,000 people, with a newspaper and modern hospital, and having served as the county seat since 1789, it has been a principal medium through which the rural residents of Big Valley have received urban economic and educational influences.

Population and Culture of the Region

Mifflin County was originally settled by Scotch-Irish people, but since the turn of the nineteenth century the inhabitants of Big Valley have been principally of Pennsylvania German extraction. Among this group and their neighbors this ethnic element is colloquially referred to as the "Pennsylvania Dutch." They think of themselves as descendants of German-speaking emigrants from Europe who arrived in Pennsylvania in the 18th Century with later immigrants to the United States from the same sections of Europe being distinguished as "German Americans." The earliest Pennsylvania Germans came largely from the Rhenish Palatinate and near-neighboring areas. The "Pennsylvania Dutch" dialect, still spoken by many inhabitants of Big Valley, derives mainly from Palatine German.

Both Mrs. Yoder and her husband, as well as most of their neighbors in Big Valley, are of Pennsylvania Dutch descent. They are also of Mennonite faith. This is shown by the white head covering or "prayer veil" Mrs. Yoder wears in this film. Her costume in general conforms to the tenet of her church that its communicants avoid the fads and fashions of the modern world. Her church is a conservative congregation, as are all the Mennonite churches in this area. These churches were established by families who withdrew from the rigorous requirements of the "Old Order" Amish community, which has been in the Kishacoquillas Valley since the early 1790's.

There are now several Amish and Mennonite congregations in Big Valley. The Amish are among the most conservative sectarians to be found in the United States at the present time. Both Amish and Mennonites share the same basic religious beliefs, but their customs based on these beliefs differ in many ways and in various degrees. In most respects the Amish are more conservative and the Mennonites more liberal in their corresponding beliefs and practices.

In such sectarian societies it is necessary to know the religious beliefs of the people in order to understand the customs they base upon their beliefs. Only two of these need to be mentioned in the present connection. In general the most fundamental emphasis of Amish and Mennonite people is their belief that Christians should not conform to the modern ways of worldly people. This explains much of their culture, notably their plain clothing and their social separation from other groups. All of the Amish and many Mennonites also have a testimony prohibiting photographs, or any other kind of living likeness, of persons of their religious persuasion.

Both Amish and Mennonites differ among themselves in these beliefs, however. Thus Mrs. Yoder was willing to be photographed, whereas her unmarried sister and her mother, both of whom live in Big Valley, would have resisted such a procedure. Indeed, it was necessary to ask several families in Big Valley, before one was found who was willing to be photographed for the sake of pictorially preserving an aspect of everyday life which is rapidly disappearing from even the most conservative rural groups in modern America.

Old-fashioned Methods of Making Bread

There are still families to be found in rural Pennsylvania in which bread is made in the old-time kitchen in the old-time manner. There are not many such families, however, and even among them the process has been modified by modern innovations. In fact, cultural change can be observed in process in Mrs. Yoder's kitchen. Thus it may be noted that Mrs. Yoder has an electric stove, as well as a wood range, in her kitchen. She uses her electric stove for most of her cooking and baking, which she justifies by arguing that the electric heat is more easily controlled and that it does not make her kitchen so hot in the summer time. She uses the wood stove in the winter because it helps to heat the house. She also now uses compressed dry yeast cakes, rather than old-fashioned homemade liquid yeast. She also ordinarily does not employ the box-like "dough tray" which she uses in this film — indeed, she borrowed this from a more conservative family that lives at the far end of the Big Valley. However, she regularly bakes bread for her family at least once a week, and sometimes more frequently, and in cold weather uses her wood range.

Mrs. Yoder knows the old-time method of breadmaking, although she no longer employs it in the same way as her grandmother used to. It was essentially the same method everywhere, and has been described by a Mennonite author as it was used by her grandmother in a Mennonite community in rural Virginia two generations ago:

> Each Tuesday and Thursday evening Grandmother brought from the cellar or springhouse the can of liquid yeast that she had saved from the preceding bake day. She mixed into this some salt, sugar, and fat and added enough warm water to make a gallon crock full of liquid. She then took the lid off the dough tray and at one end sifted a large amount of flour. Her next step was to make a well in the sifted flour and pour in the liquid. She worked the dough with her hands, adding more flour until she had a smooth, round ball of dough that no longer stuck to her fingers. Then she covered this with a clean cloth, put the lid on the tray, added another log to the fire, and went to bed.
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> In the morning she was up bright and early. As soon as breakfast had been started, she hurried to the outdoor oven in the back yard and made a fire. While the stones or bricks heated on the inside, she worked "out" the loaves of bread. She usually had twelve to fourteen loaves each baking. When the oven had heated to the correct temperature, she raked all the coals and ashes outside and slipped in the pans of dough.

Showalter, Mary Emma, Mennonite Community Cookbook: (of) Favorite Family Recipes. Scottdale, Pa., The Mennonite Community Association, 1957. p. 2.

Less than a half a dozen dough trays exist in Big Valley at the present time, and none is today regularly used in breadmaking. They have been removed from rural farm kitchens and are found as keepsakes in a few rural homes; more often, however, they grace the antique collector's urban apartment or "colonially"-furnished living room. There are still a few outdoor bakovens to be found on Amish farms in Big Valley. They are used infrequently, and then usually only when the Amish family is host to the entire local Amish congregation, at which times huge quantities of bread loaves and "half-moon pies" are produced as the Mennonites, are now using commercially manufactured and "store-boughten" yeast cakes. Indeed, bread trucks, which deliver commercial bakery bread, now make their regular rounds from farm to farm in Big Valley.

The essential steps employed in home-kitchen breadmaking, are accurately shown in the present film. For more specific documentation, however, we offer two authentic old-time Pennsylvania-Dutch white-bread recipes. They are essentially the same, except that one recipe is for twice the number of loaves as the other. It will be noted that Mrs. Yoder used no mashed potato in her recipe, and she also used warm water rather than lukewarm scalded milk. However, she did add melted lard to her dough mixture. Old recipes vary from family to family, and each **hausfrau** has her favorite.

For homemade bread recipes see: 1. Showalter, Mary Emma, Mennonite Community Cookbook. The Mennonite Community Association, Scottdale, Pa., 1957.
2. Hark, Ann and Barba, Preston A., Pennsylvania German Cookery, Schlechters, Allentown, Pa., 1956.

Modern dieticians are shocked by the knowledge that Pennsylvania Dutch cookery was, and remains, heavily laden with baked goods and starchy foods. Any Pennsylvania Dutchman will tell you that "bread is the staff of life," and all Dutchmen will agree. But "bread" is here used generically to include a wide variety of rolls, biscuits, muffins, noodles, dumplings, pancakes, waffles, loaf, layer cakes, drop cakes, cupcakes, pies, tarts, and "dunkes," such as cookies, crullers, and doughnuts. There is a playful Pennsylvania Dutch saying that it is "all right to dunk to the first knuckle." All old-timers also agree that "En halwer Leeb Brot iss besser ass gaar ken Brot" — that "a half a loaf (of anything) is better than none." Nostalgic Pennsylvania Dutchman would also most emphatically agree with their dialect poet (Joseph P. Deibert), who wrote that

> Backkarb Leeb, gebacke drauss
> Im grosse alde Backoffe,
> Mit de siesse Holsesch Gruscht,
> Hot alles iwwerdroffe.

It is practically impossible to translate Dutch dialect poetry metrically, but this stanza says that bread dough raised in the old straw baskets (no longer used anywhere among the Pennsylvania Dutch), and baked in the old outdoor bakeovens, with the bread crust sweetened by the oven's fragrant wood-ashes — such bread is better than all other kinds made in any other way. And, one need not be a Pennsylvania Dutchman to agree that indeed, this is true, for there is simply nothing better than old-fashioned bread made in the old-fashioned way.

Film Contents

The film shows the dissolving of the yeast cakes in warm water, the mixing of the dough which includes Spring wheat bread-flour, sugar, salt, and melted lard, the raising of the dough, its kneading and raising again, the shaping of the loaves, which are then raised in the wooden dough tray, and, finally, the baking of the bread in a wood-fired oven.

Consistent with Pennsylvania German practice, Mrs. Yoder does not depend on exact measurements of temperature or quantities of ingredients, as is the case in modern cooking. Rather she depends on "feel," and adds ingredients or allows the dough to stand and rise until it "feels right."

This method of cooking is more difficult to communicate to others than is the modern method which depends on exact temperatures and precise measurement of quantities.

A FILM

We are privileged to publish in the Eck for today Professor Mook's script that accompanies the film "Old-Fashioned Bread Baking in Rural Pennsylvania," produced by that University Division of Instructional Services in Cooperation with the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Pennsylvania State University, under the scientific direction of Dr. Maurice A. Mook, Professor of Anthropology. It is a research document published for use in research and university education. It was produced by D. P. Duvall and L. P. Greenhill and published by Encyclopaedia Cinematographica, Institut fuer den Wissenschaftlichen Film, Goettingen, Germany. Length of film is 443 ft., running time 12 minutes, 18 seconds. For further information: Mr. L. A. Greenhill, Director, Division of Instructional Service, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pa. — Ed.

TABLE REFLECTIONS

Annere Leit ihr Brot schmackt immer besser.

Was batt en scheeni Schissel, wann nix drin iss?

Was batt die Supp, wammer ken Leffel hot?

En hungrich Maul losst sich net neefiche.

Der Hunger iss der bescht Koch.

Yuscht sei gedrocht un net vergesse, Ded Abbedit kummt mit am Esse.

Es kumme meh Leit am Dich um als im Grieg.

Wer net kummt zu rechter Zeit, Der muss esse was iwwrich bleibt.

Luschdich gelebt un selich gschtarwe, Iss em Deiwel sei Rechling verdarwe.